

February 5, 2017 – *5th Sunday after Epiphany*

**"Salt and Light”**

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

*Matthew 5:13-16*

*“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

You are the salt of this earth, the salt for the land, salt for the whole of humankind, other translators put it. In these days of low sodium everything, it’s important to remember the value and importance of salt in Jesus’ time. Salt was a precious commodity. Salt was meted out for pay—hence our world “salary” from the Latin salarium.

Salt was used to enhance the taste of food and to preserve food. Friendships were sealed by tasting salt together. Salt was rubbed on newborn babies for medicinal and cleansing purposes. I doubt that Robert and Allison rubbed baby Amelia Grace with salt. But we know that they have most certainly bathed her in love and that she is already on her way, even as a tiny, tiny, baby, to becoming a disciple who will be salt for the whole of humankind.

When Jesus first used salt as a descriptor for his disciples, all these meanings and properties of salt would have come to mind: seasoning, preserving, enhancing, cleansing, heralding friendships, conferring value.

There’s something else about salt that should be evident today as we share in the communion bread prepared for us this month by Berneice Southcott. Salt is one of the four essential ingredients of bread, along with flour, water, and yeast. Bakers know that salt regulates yeast activity. Salt actually makes the dough stronger and less sticky. Essential to the baking of bread, salt “gives its life,” as it were, to make the dough strong and become a rich and beautiful and life-giving loaf of bread.

Let’s turn our thoughts for a moment to Jesus’ second descriptor of disciples: You are the light of the world. Remember, he had said this of himself: I am the light of the world. Now he says it of his disciples: You are the light of the world. What does this tell us about who we are?

Two weeks ago, David, my mom and I drove across the desert to Phoenix where I preached at my home church on behalf of the Claremont School of Theology. Our drives over and back across the desert, between storms, were truly among the most gorgeous I have ever experienced, and I’ve crossed that desert many times. Snow on the mountains. Crystal clear air. Dark clouds, and billowing white clouds, casting shadows on the mountains, the mesas, the desert expanse. The air was so clear and the light so fine that we could see the various mountain ranges on the distant horizon.

And the mountainsides were greener than I’ve ever seen them after all the rain that we have had. We looked upon these vistas as if we were photographers, or painters, in awe of all that we could see in every direction.

But to push a bit deeper, the mountains were green because of the rain, yes, but also because of the light. It is through photosynthesis that green plants, cacti even, use energy from the sun to transform water, carbon dioxide and minerals into food when the plant is exposed to light. Photosynthesis means light and synthesis, coming together, combining to bring forth the life of the desert. The greenness comes through the transformative work of the light.

When I got home and read again this passage for our worship here today, it hit me in a new way that both salt and light are, in fact, transformative agents. They cause awesome things to happen. They bring disparate elements together to bring forth life and health and food and sustenance and beauty.

This is a beautiful, powerful, poetic description of who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus is so direct in this passage. He’s not coddling us with phrases like---we ought to try and become salt, or we ought to try and be like light or if we work at it we might be a little bit like salt and light for the world. He’s not pointing us towards what might become someday. NO—he insists that we are the salt for all humankind. We are the light for the world.

Spiritual maturity as disciples is a matter of manifesting who we are, of being what God has created us to be---transformative agents, salt and light, bringing forth life and health and beauty and blessing for this world and for all of humankind. As disciples, we pull things together, bring people together, bring resources together to make possible the shalom, the wholeness, the healing and justice and peace God intends, in human hearts and in this world.

We cannot always know just how we will be called upon to let our light shine, or what darkness it may illumine for another, what dark places of the human heart or of this world it might open, what joy it will bring, what comfort or hope, what new synthesis it will make possible. We cannot know when our salt will be the transformative agent that brings people together and makes the dough strong and transforms it into life-giving bread.

Yet even now, we rejoice in the salt and light present here in the life of this faithful congregation. We rejoice in our youth, who last Sunday so generously let their light shine for us all to see. We rejoice in all those youth and mentors who will form our 2017 Confirmation class. We rejoice in all those who made our most recent Community Meal happen—baking, cooking, serving, sharing. We rejoice in all who will participate in next Sunday’s Home Run for Kids to support the children and families of Family Place. We rejoice in all those who have persevered through the years, from the time of streetcars in Santa Monica, and remain a vital and vibrant life-giving witness in our community to this day.

And in these critical times in the life of our nation, we rejoice in being a community that opens our doors and hearts to welcome in our Jewish and Muslim neighbors in prayer. We rejoice in being a congregation welcoming one another, across whatever differences might otherwise separate us, to bind us together in a strong community of love where ideas and hopes and fears and dreams are shared, where all lives are treasured, where everyone matters, and where God, our loving, life-giving God, is real.

Today, we are all, each and every one of us, invited to feast at Christ’s holy table, where we find sustenance in this holy meal and in this faithful community. And going forward, we pray each day to claim our God-given identity as salt and light in every thought and action, for this world and for all of humankind, that we may live without fear, live with great hope and joy, into the glorious future that God, even now, is preparing.

Amen

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**First United Methodist Church • 1008 Eleventh Street Santa Monica, CA 90403 www.santamonicaumc.org ▪ 310-393-8258**